

Fort Mifflin, Commandant's House
(Headquarters)
Mud Island
Marine and Penrose Ferry Road
Philadelphia
Philadelphia County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-1225-C-

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
Reduced Copies of Measured Drawings

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY HABS No. PA-1225 C

FORT MIFFLIN COMMANDANT'S HOUSE (Headquarters)

Location: In the center of the parade ground of Fort Mifflin, Mud Island, Marine and Penrose Ferry Roads, Philadelphia, Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania.

Present Owner: City of Philadelphia.

Present Use: Historic site museum.

Significance: Located at the focal point of the parade, the commandant's house, built by 1796, is the most architecturally significant structure in the fort.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The commandant's house, also called the "citadel", was first referred to in January, 1796, by Secretary of War Timothy Pickering in his report to the Senate, when he stated, "A fort, on Mud Island, is about half done, and a citadel has been erected to complete the fort, and on a plan much more circumscribed than was first projected" (ASP 1:111). The reduced plan was developed by Lt.-Col. Stephen Rochefontaine, who replaced Pierre Charles L'Enfant as chief engineer at the end of 1794.

On Henry Belin's 1839 plans and elevations, the commandant's house, then called "Head Quarters," differs slightly from the present structure. The porch on the southeast elevation originally had wide, arched windows which have since been partially blocked and replaced by rectangular ones. Evidence of a previous roof exists under the present hipped one, altered when parapets were added. Attic vents that are now located along the frieze do not appear on the 1839 northwest elevation, but there is one on the southeast elevation.

For additional information, see Fort Mifflin History (PA-1225).

Prepared by Alison K. Hoagland
Historian
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Fall, 1979.

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PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This elegant structure exhibits Federal influences and retains some fine interior detailing from an 1830s renovation.
2. Condition of fabric: Poor. The structure is frequently subjected to standing water after heavy rains flood the parade.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The main structure of the building is rectangular, 34'-5" (three bays) x 70'-2 1/2" (seven bays) with a rectangular porch chamber, 10'-1" deep by 27'-2", centered on the southeast elevation.
2. Foundations: The foundation of the main structure appears to be of dressed stone, three courses of which are above grade. At the porch chamber the foundation appears to be stuccoed brick. Vents, which originally had louvered insets, are located near grade at the long elevations.
3. Wall construction, finish and color: The red brick walls of the structure are stuccoed and retain remains of yellow and white wash. At each corner and between the masonry openings, pilasters divide the elevations into bays. A continuous plinth course, projecting from the wall and set on the foundation, receives the pilasters which are unfluted and completed with wooden, Doric capitals. Above the capitals a projecting, modified classical entablature with a wide, flat fascia forms an architrave band below a recessed frieze band and a simple wood cornice. The entablature originally formed a roof parapet which screened a steeply pitched hipped roof.

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4. Structural system: Load bearing brick walls.
5. Porches: The porch chamber of the southeast elevation, which with three pilasters is detailed similarly to the main structure, contains two rooms providing separate access to the commandant's quarters and offices. Two or three plain gneiss stone steps descend to grade from each exterior doorway.
6. Chimneys: Two brick chimneys, now deteriorated, extend above the roof line. Both, one near the northeast end of the roof slope, and one near the ridge of the southwest end, had two-course corbeled caps and were unstuccoed.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Centered on the northwest elevation, a doorway trimmed with an ovolo backband, recessed from the face of the stucco, is hung with a pair of doors which have four vertically arranged panels in each leaf. The square bottom panel is below a wide lock rail and upper rectangular panels. Filling in the opening, which is slightly higher than the flanking window openings, is a transom which originally had five lights. A similar doorway is centered on the southwest elevation, though the door panels are backed up with vertical beaded boards. A false doorway was located in the center bay of the northeast elevation. At the side elevations of the porch chamber, semicircular arched doorways have an ovolo backband, typical beaded inner edges, plain keystone and impost blocks, and are hung with pairs of doors having three square vertically arranged panels in each leaf with a wide lock rail. Typically, the slightly raised panels have flat cyma recta panel molding.

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Radial, six-light lunettes are missing and the openings are filled with plywood.

- b. Windows and shutters: The window openings, which appear to have been originally semicircularly arched, have narrow frames which are trimmed with an ovolo backband and set with double hung, six-over-six-light sash. The sills are unmolded. Pairs of blinds with two panels of fixed louvers were hung at each opening on strap hinges, the pintles for which exist in the jambs. The blinds had ring pulls and were secured when closed with a dead bolt located on the lock rail. Wrought iron shutter dogs, driven into the masonry below the bottom rail height, held the blinds in an open position. The window openings of the end elevations are bricked up, forming interior closets, except at the east bay of the northeast elevation.

Later attic openings are located in the frieze space of the entablature. One is centered at each side of the porch chamber, one on the northeast end elevation, one on the southwest elevation, and three on the northwest elevation. Each opening had louvered inserts in two horizontally arranged panels within molded frames and provided ventilation of the attic space. The frieze opening of the southwest elevation has been cut down and infilled with a pair of eight-light casement sashes. The window openings of the porch chamber were originally large, semicircularly arched, glazed openings which were altered with the installation of six-over-six-light sash to match the other window openings. Most of the sash are removed and all the window openings are closed with plywood at each elevation.

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8. Roof:

- a. Shape and covering: The existing low, hipped roof of the main structure and the porch chamber, which is constructed from the ridge of the original hipped roof to the top of the parapet, is covered with 18" wide sheets of zinc laid with standing seams. Below this roof the original roof framing still exists with dormer-like constructions at each end which provided outside openings for the main attic rooms.
- b. Cornice and eaves: Completing the entablature of the parapet at the present roof's eaves is a boxed cornice without a crown molding, but with a small ovolo-cavetto bed molding below the soffit.
- c. Cupola: Centered on the roof at the ridge is an octagonal cupola with a bell-shaped roof covered with tin sheets. Tuscan pilasters are set at each corner angle and support a full entablature with a double fascia architrave, frieze space, an ovolo-cavetto bed molding below a corona with a cyma recta crown molding. Each face was originally glazed, though the two-over-four-light sashes are now missing and the openings are closed with plywood. A metal clad base for a weathervane projects above the roof.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. First floor: Basically the structure is divided into two suites of rooms separated by a transverse hallway. The two northeast rooms, probably originally office space, are separated by a chimney breast with back to back

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fireplaces. The opposite suite of rooms, probably the commandant's quarters, consists of four rooms with a central chimney core providing a corner fireplace in each room. A vestibule is located at the southwest exterior doorway and provides access to the two southwest rooms of the quarters. Another vestibule is located at the northwest exterior doorway, providing access to the room with the cookstove, the attic stairway and the transverse hallway. In the porch chamber on the southeast facade are two rooms; one opens into the east room of the quarters, the other opens into the transverse hallway.

b. Attic:

The attic space is equally divided into two main spaces by a central stair hall which also provides access to a T-shaped space within the porch chamber roof structure. The frieze windows of the end elevations and the porch chamber provide outside openings for the attic spaces. Small doorways to the eave spaces, located opposite each frieze opening, are in the knee walls of the attic.

2. Stairways:

A narrow, enclosed, straight run stairway, with a closet under the carriage opening into the kitchen, rises from the vestibule of the northwest doorway. The treads have scotia trim and beaded wall stringers extend up each side of the run. Balustrading is missing at the attic stairwell. Adjacent to the stairwell on the second floor is a ladder which provides access to the cupola through a square hatchway.

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3. Flooring:

The floors are wood, typically with 5 1/4" wide boards at the first floor and random width boards at the attic floor. The floors of the porch rooms, a step down from the first floor level, are brick, laid in a herringbone pattern.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: The interior of the structure is plaster on lath, all of which is deteriorating.

5. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: Typically, the doorways throughout the house have corner block trim with symmetrically molded jamb and head sections and a roundel motif in the corner block. The trim is received at the floor on plinth blocks the height of the baseboarding.

The doors have three narrow panels above a wide lock rail and a large bottom panel. These doors, which are of mortise and tenon construction, have flat cyma recta panel molding and slightly raised panels. The exterior doors with deep, splayed reveals sheathed with flush vertical boarding have simple frames with beaded inner edges. Opening from the porch chamber into the transverse hallway is a semicircular opening with a missing fan light and with beaded, single fascia architrave trim having an ovolo backband and impost blocks. The archway's parallel reveals and its soffit have sunken panels with flat cyma recta panel molding. One leaf of a pair of double doors survives at the opening and has three vertically arranged panels which match the spacing

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of the panels of the reveal with a small top panel over two longer panels separated by a wide lock rail. The panel molding of the door is a quirked cyma with a bead and fillet. Opening into the east room from the porch chamber is a pair of doors similar in detail to the exterior openings, complete with a five-light transom and corner block trim on the interior wall face.

b. Windows:

The windows are trimmed with corner block trim matching the doorways. Plain stools with molded, triple fascia aprons are set below the splayed reveals and the soffits which are plastered.

6. Decorative features and trim:

The first floor rooms have a molded cap on the baseboarding. In the attic, beaded baseboarding matches the beaded casing of the columns, doubled rafters, and diagonal braces of the roof structure which are exposed approximately 8'-0" on center in the long rooms.

Plain board trim with single panel doors are at the approximately 3' high doors to the eave spaces. Flat cyma recta backband molding, like that of the porch chamber windows, trims the attic doorways which lack doors. The octagonal wood base of the weathervane, boxed at the attic level, extends through the floor and flat plaster ceiling of the cupola. Each vertical member of the cupola structure is boxed and beaded and forms jambs at the window openings. Beaded head and apron members are contiguous with the

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vertical members. The dado is plastered. In the kitchen a built-in cabinet is located adjacent to the stair closet, which has a three-panel door and flat cyma recta trim. The cabinet extends to counter height with three drawers over two pairs of doors set at floor level. Each door has a single panel, slightly raised and trimmed with typical cyma recta panel molding. Above, a cupboard with two pairs of beaded vertical board doors is completed with an echinus crown molding.

7. Hardware:

Typically the doors are hung with butt hinges. The double doors are secured with wrought iron dead bolts at the heads and sills. Mortised locks with porcelain knobs and separate escutcheons are also typical, though there is evidence of cast iron rim locks on several doors.

8. Mechanical equipment:

- a. Heating: Fireplaces heated the major first floor rooms, while thimble holes in the chimneys at the attic level suggest that these spaces were heated with stoves. One chimney piece, with black, white-grained marble jamb sections supporting a flush marble lintel and with a narrow, recessed fascia at the firebox, survives. Others are ghosted in the plaster work, though two bracketed mantel shelves also survive. The hearths are brick laid on edge, with exception of the hearth of the marble chimneypiece which is a slate slab. An early cast iron cook stove with a six-burner range top and two ovens is set into the kitchen firebox. The stove has sunburst

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medallion motifs on the oven doors, on the stove frame and on the back plate all set within beading. It appears that all the fireboxes may have originally had stone lintels, one of which exists in the east room of the quarters.

D. Site and Surroundings:

1. General setting: Situated near the center of the Parade, the long elevations of the Commandant's House extend northeast and southwest. The porch chamber is on axis between the Northeast Sally Port (HABS No. PA-1225) and the Artillery Shed (HABS No. PA-1225-B).
2. Landscape: Slate paving fills the space between the main structure and each side of the porch chamber and is contained with gneiss curbing. A narrow slate walk extends to the Northeast Sally Port. At the northwest and southwest elevations brick paving laid in a herringbone pattern extends 5'-3" to 7'-0" from the structure and is contained in similar gneiss curbing. A deteriorated narrow brick walk extends towards the West Powder Magazine (HABS No. PA-1225-G), which lies parallel to the Commandant's House. To the southwest and parallel to the brick paving is a gutter which slopes to an open drain that parallels the main axis of the structure and extends to the culvert under the west rampart.
3. Outbuildings: Remains of brick paving and foundations near the northwest elevation of the structure may have been locations of privies.

Prepared by Rodd L. Wheaton
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Historic American
Buildings Survey
Spring, 1974.

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PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Fort Mifflin projects of the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) were carried out during the summers of 1969 and 1970 with grants from the Haas Community Funds in cooperation with the Philadelphia Historical Commission, the Independence National Historical Park, and the Shackamaxon Society, Inc. The projects were under the direction of James C. Massey, Chief, HABS. The 1969 survey team was supervised by R. Michael Schneider (Texas A & M University) with student assistant architects Allan H. Steenhusen (Iowa State University), Bruce V.A. Bonacher (Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute), and Malcolm Heard, Jr. (Tulane University). The 1970 survey team was supervised by Allan H. Steenhusen (Iowa State University) with architect Ronald B. Tjerandsen (University of Washington) and student assistant architect John T. Shumate (Carnegie-Mellon University). The drawings were completed in 1971 by HABS architect Allan H. Steenhusen and student assistant architect Tim Wolosz (University of Cincinnati). The drawings were edited in 1972-73 under the direction of John C. Poppeliers, Chief, HABS, by HABS architects Rodd L. Wheaton and John A. Burns with student assistant architect K. Barry Peckham (University of Cincinnati). Historian for the project was A.C. (Gus) Hamblett until 1972. The data was then edited by several members of the HABS staff, including Rodd L. Wheaton, John A. Burns, and Philip Hamp, and completed by Alison K. Hoagland in 1979.